

FireFit Footnotes

Preparing for a "FireFit" season

By Bequi Livingston

Can you imagine a sprinter running the race of their life without warming up first? It hurts just to think about it. Now imagine a wildland fire crew receiving an abrupt phone call to meet at the station because they're needed for initial attack on a fire. Once at the station, they pile into the crew carrier and drive an hour to the incident command post. On a small Type 3 or 4 fire, they would be expected to get their briefing and immediately head out for the fireline—without warming up. Imagine the trek: 1–2 miles up a rugged, rocky slope to an elevation of about 8,500 feet, carrying fire gear, chainsaws and equipment. We've all been there!

Just as you'd never expect an athlete to compete without adequate preparation, we should never expect wildland firefighters to face the rigors of the fire season without adequate preparation. The FireFit program believes pre-season conditioning is essential not only to minimizing "overuse" injuries related to physical training (PT), but also to ensuring every firefighter is adequately prepared to take the Work Capacity Test and fight fires safely.

Because the goals for preseason conditioning differ from those during the fire season, it's important to utilize a program, such as FireFit, that promotes muscle balance, stretching and core stability. The right conditioning program helps maintain a balance between the essential components that help us achieve optimal fitness. These components include:

- Warm-up and cool-down;
- Cardiovascular fitness (aerobic and anaerobic);
- Muscular strength and muscular endurance;
- Flexibility; and
- Rest and relaxation.

As we continue to track trends every year, we've noticed that overuse injuries seem to plague the firefighting community. Most of these injuries are due to personnel doing too much too soon, and failing to warm up and/or stretch properly. More often than not, fire personnel have a limited amount of time they can devote to PT, therefore they tend to rush through their workout, eliminating the warm-up and cool-down completely.

One of the most important aspects of pre-season fitness is an adequate warm-up, which should be completed prior to performing any PT. A proper warm-up includes a slow progression of activity, such as a brisk walk or slow jog, to get the oxygenated blood circulating to the muscles and extremities, followed by dynamic limbering stretches to further prepare the muscles for the demands of the workout.

Exercise should always be followed by a cool-down to allow the heart rate to return to normal and help circulate the blood so it doesn't pool in the large muscles, which can sometimes cause muscle soreness. A cool-down should



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include slow, static stretching, breathing and relaxation techniques.

Along with fitness conditioning, good nutrition, hydration and stress management must also be incorporated into firefighter fitness/wellness programs. We must encourage fire personnel to take in the right amount of calories, the right combination of nutrients and the right amount of fluids to prepare their bodies for the physical challenges of firefighting. Providing our firefighters with current nutrition information is a proactive measure that any fire manager can take.

Extensive research has been conducted on firefighter nutrition and hydration, but if you're not sure where to find it, check out "Eat & Run," p. 14 in the April issue. You can also visit the Missoula Technology and Development Center Web site at www.mtfdc.gov or the FireFit Web site at www.nifc.gov/FireFit/index.htm.

The better prepared we are physically and mentally, the easier it will be for us to accomplish our objectives—firefighter health and safety both on and off the fireline.

Bequi Livingston is the regional fire operations health and safety specialist for the U.S. Forest Service, Southwestern Regional Office. Livingston is a certified Personal Fitness Trainer, Fitness Specialist and Fitness Instructor. She is currently completing her college education with a major in exercise science and minor in athletic training. She owns a fitness consulting business, "BodySense," and developed Fireline Fitness in 1984 in order to provide a balanced fitness program for wildland firefighters. Livingston, along with a team of other interagency fire experts, recently developed the national FireFit program endorsed by the Federal Fire and Aviation Safety Team.